

CAN WE "FORGIVE AND NOT FORGET"?

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by
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Main points:

Tutu's visit to Israel: the beginning

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu arrived in Jerusalem on Dec. 22, 1989. The Archbishop of Cape Towns was the guest of Archbishop Camir Kafity, head of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem. Tutu spent most of his visit in East Jerusalem and on the West Bank. In a meeting with Palestinian religious and community leaders on the Temple Mount, he expressed support for Palestinian statehood and said Israel had a right to exist in security. He said a prayer at a memorial near the Al-Aksa mosque to the victims of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. Then he told his Palestinian hosts: "We support your struggle for justice, for peace, for statehood and independence, and we want to say that you will attain your goal." Then he continued: "We also want to say that we bear no animosity toward the Jewish people, but we call into question the policies of the Israel government. We say Israel has the right to exist, to territorial integrity and to the security due to an independent state, but, equally, Israel must recognize the legitimate aspirations of the native people of this country."

Tutu's remarks at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial

On Tuesday, December 26, Archbishop Tutu visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial. Asked what he would say to the children of Holocaust victims, Tutu answered: "As our Lord would say, in the end, the positive thing that can come . . . is the spirit of forgiving, not forgetting, but the spirit of saying: God . . . this has happened to us, we pray for those who made it happen; forgive them, and help us to forgive them, and help us so that we in our turn will not make others suffer." Tutu later added: "I pray . . . that Israel will hear the cry of the Palestinians, that they, too, are people created in the image of God." On leaving Yad Vashem, Tutu wrote in the guest book: "This is a shattering experience, and the world must never forget our inhumanity to one another."

Prior to his arrival in Jerusalem, Tutu gave an interview to Ha'aretz in which he said: "I am against violence, but I am also against repression. I condemn all forms of terrorism by any side. But what Israel is doing in the territories is also unacceptable Jews, who were the victims of a great injustice, cannot allow their government to turn others into victims of injustice. This is such a shocking contradiction."

Turning the word "forgiveness" into a sword against Israel

the idea of forgiveness: Christian and Jewish notions

love your enemies and pray for them (from Matthew)
forgiveness is a prerogative of the victim, not a requirement
God may forgive, but humans are not obligated to
Is it only Jews who must forgive/ is it only Jews who can
forgive/ who was injured by the Holocaust -- was it only
Jews who were injured or the entire human race -- is Tutu
saying that only Jews can forgive because they were the most
injured? Not likely.

Christian guilt feelings and the Holocaust: In the end, the
Nazis were able to . . . use the Christian myth of Jewish
villainy to their own purposes. Without Christianity, the
Jews could never have become the central victims of the
Holocaust. Christianity provided an indispensable
ingredient, the demonological interpretation of the Jews.

the Holocaust: the connection between memory and justice

Jewish tradition rests on memory. Memory of Jerusalem
essential for a people in exile. But memory is also
associated with knowledge. In his autobiographical essay,
When Memory Comes, Saul Friedlander quotes Gustav Meyrink:
"When knowledge comes, memory comes too,
little by little,
Knowledge and memory are one and the same thing."

Jewish tradition emphasizes that we must learn from the
past, not simply forgive or forget. The prosecution of war
criminals; are we asked to forgive those Nazis? But their
prosecution is essential to deter genocides in the future.
Does forgiveness mean don't prosecute them. Jews are not
seeking revenge or playing ethnic politics; they are seeking
justice as an affirmation of human rights for all peoples.
Bringing Nazi war criminals to justice does not bring back
to life one victim of the Holocaust. But the punishment of
Nazi war criminals is a step in the direction of prosecuting
bringing all war criminals to justice.

There is a slogan sometimes associated with the Holocaust. The slogan is "Never Again". "Never Again" does not just mean never again must we see a Nazi Holocaust directed against the Jews. It means never again must we see another Holocaust directed against any group.

The Holocaust was a unique historical event. That does not mean it should be isolated and set aside from the rest of human experience. If the tragedy is to mean anything, we must learn from it. We must take steps to prevent its recurrence.

From the point of view of human rights for all peoples, the very last thing that Bishop Tutu should ask Jews is that they forgive the perpetrators of the Holocaust. In a sense the whole post-1945 international human rights movement has its origin in the Holocaust. The first expressions of international human rights after World War II, the human rights provisions of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Genocide Convention, the Refugee Convention, all bear a direct linkage to the Holocaust. Having all war crimes, all crimes against humanity punishable is a principle that rests on a legal foundation which remembers the Holocaust and refuses to forgive the perpetrators.

the idea of justice as transcendent

Job, 16:18 O Earth cover not my blood
And let my cry find no resting place.

Remember the dead and fight like hell for the living.

If I am for myself, who will be for me?
And if I am for myself only, what am I?
Hillel